DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 219 CS 505 843

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TITLE The Manifestation of Consistent Judging Standards in After-Dinner Speaking.
PUB DATE 6 Nov 87
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (73rd, Boston, MA, November 5-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Evaluation Criteria; Higher Education; Judges; *Persuasive Discourse; *Public Speaking; Secondary Education; Speech Communication; *Speech Evaluation; Speech Instruction; Standards
IDENTIFIERS *After Dinner Speeches; Coaching (Speech); *Speech Tournaments

ABSTRACT

The standards used to evaluate after-dinner speech in forensic contests are explored in this paper. The central thesis of this theoretical article suggests that the standards generated by the Second National Conference on Forensics for the evaluation of public address are applicable to the contest event of after-dinner speaking. The paper argues that there is room for additional standards of evaluation but those standards ought to receive field testing before judges use them for a decision in a round of tournament competition. The principal data base of the study comes from published materials on the evaluation of forensic speakers. The paper calls for future research dealing with the exploration and testing of potential critical standards in the evaluation of after-dinner speakers. (SKC)

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The Manifestation of Consistent Judging Standards in After-Dinner Speaking

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Presented at the Annual National Meeting of the Speech Communication Association in Boston, Massachusetts

November 6, 1987

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Abstract

This paper explores the standards being used to evaluate the after-dinner speech in forensic contests. The central thesis of theoretical article suggests that the standards generated by the Second National Conference on Forensics for the evaluation of public address are applicable to the contest event of after-dinner speaking. The argument is made that there is room for additional standards of evaluation but those standards ought to receive field testing before judges use them for reasons for a decision in a round of competition at a tournament. The principal data base of this study comes from published materials on the evaluation of forensic speakers. A call is made for future research dealing with the exploration and testing of potential critical standards in the evaluation of after-dinner speakers.

In setting forth Resolution 45 at the Second National Conference on Forensics(1984), participants argued that the proposed standards for evaluating public address events would permit a more coherent evaluation of the contestants and provide a frame of reference for criticism. The crucial concern addressed by this researcher is whether the Conference's standards of evaluation are applicable to the event of after-dinner speaking. This theoretical article will briefly review those standards and the rationale for those standards; assess the applicability of those standards to the contest category of after-dinner speaking; and finally, offer some suggestions on how the critic-judge might improve ballot commentary by expanding upon the scope of the current set of evaluation standards.

The standards of evaluation for public address which are included in Resolution 45 are:

1. The speaker's presentation should identify a thesis or claim from which the speech is developed;
2. The speaker's presentation should provide a motivational link(relevance factor) between the topic and the audience;
3. The speaker's presentation should develop a substantive analysis of the thesis using appropriate supporting materials;
4. The speaker's presentation should be organized in a

coherent manner;

5. The speaker's presentation should use language which is appropriate for the topic and the audience;

6. The speaker's presentation should be delivered using appropriate vocal and physical presentation skills (1984, p. 90).

The rationale for those standards of evaluation was characterized by Hanson (1985). The rationale for the first standard suggested that students need feedback on whether they are effective in focusing the listeners' attention on one major issue. The rationale accompanying the second standard stressed the importance of affording the contestants feedback on whether they were capable of capturing and sustaining the attention of the listeners. The rationale supporting the third standard of evaluation underscored the importance of affording feedback on the issue of subject-matter development. The rationale for standard number four called attention to the need for feedback on the organization of the materials in the message. The rationale related to the fifth standard argues that it is important for the contestants to receive feedback on how they used language to facilitate the acceptability of their messages; and finally, the rationale supporting the sixth standard suggests that it is important for speakers to receive an assessment of whether the delivery of their speech was acceptable for the contest situation (Hanson, 1985, pp. 37-39).

The Conference's standards of evaluation and the subsequent rationale explaining those standards, provides the judge with a frame of reference. Consequently, the judge should be in a better position to evaluate the contestants' speeches. The judge should be able to function pedagogically because the judge has a set of criteria to apply. Andrews (1983) stresses the importance of a systematic evaluation:

> A critic is a specialist and must be able to communicate to others the results of his or her critical observation and inquiry. A critic combines knowledge with a systematic way of using that knowledge and constantly seeks his or her practice of criticism. In the most fundamental sense the critic is an educator. He or she confronts a message; his or her reaction to that message is not the same as the reaction of the casual or even the critical listener. The critic seeks to understand what is going on in order to interpret more fully the rhetorical dynamics involved in the production and reception of the message and to make certain judgments about the quality of the message (pp. 5-6).

Armed with an acceptable set of criteria, the critic-judge ought to be in a position to function as an educator. With the set of evaluation criteria afforded critics by Resolution 45, the critic ought to be able to provide feedback on the dynamics involved in the production of the message, the quality of the message, as well as report on the observed impact of the speech materials on the

audience.

The more pervasive question remains, however, are the criteria stated in Resolution 45 applicable to the contest category of after-dinner speaking? Perhaps one way of responding to that question is examine what forensic theorists offer as judging criteria for after-dinner speaking, and also examine what judges are saying about the evaluation of after-dinner speaking in the actual contest setting.

While one could hardly claim that there is a plethora of theoretical constructs available to the judge of after-dinner speaking, there are some thoughts afforded by theorists. According to Swanson and Zeuschner, items to be included in the evaluative assessment of an after-dinner speech are:

1. Was the subject suitable?
2. Did the speech reveal originality and creativity in the development of the subject?
3. Was the speaker's use of language appropriate to the audience and the occasion and did it enhance the ability to compel attention and secure interest?
4. Was the speaker's delivery adapted to the nature of the materials? (1983, p. 45).

Swanson and Zeuschner's thoughts seem to complement those standards espoused by the participants at the Second National Conference on Forensics [2NCF].

Using a slightly different focus, Miller (1974) wrote that

attention by the speaker [and one might add by the critic-evaluator] should be given to one's ability to share humor. Miller states:

> Some speakers use various forms of humor better than others. How effective are you, for example, in using exaggeration? understatement? puns? irony? Can you talk entertainingly about the peculiar traits of people? Are you effective in treating serious ideas lightly or light subjects seriously? (p. 157).

Miller goes on to note that some attention should also be given to one's abilities to tell stories; the "sense of the fitness of things"; one's ability to effectively use an introduction and the conclusion to a speech; as well as attending to other concerns related to an appropriate thematic development of the topic (pp. 157 - 158). While Miller's theoretical construct does not differ significantly from those constructs developed by the participants at the 2NCF, he does imply that the speaker should exhibit a talent for sharing humor and demonstate an ability to tell stories. Miller does not, however, provide the critic with any particular set of behavioral acts which the critic might use as criteria for evaluating either the talent for sharing humor or the ability to tell stories.

Klopf (1982) notes that there is one special feature of after-dinner speaking which is different from other principles of composition and delivery in public address, and that feature is

the entertainment factor of the speech. Klopf writes:

> An after-dinner speech does not have to convert an audience into a howling mob convulsed with laughter; a speech that is brightened with humor and that offers a good natured approach to a worthwhile subject usually is more appropriate. A speaker achieves his or her purpose through the use of anecdotes, illustrations, and humorous stories, if these are appropriate to the audience and the occasion and are related to the subject. Many beginning speakers fail because their material is not in harmony with the mood of the listeners and the occasion (1982, p. 234).

As Klopf suggests, a special consideration in evaluating the effectiveness of the after-dinner speaker is that of assessing the person's ability to manage the entertainment dimension of the speech situation.

Another set of forensic theorists express frustation over the lack of precise standards in describing the contest category of after-dinner speaking:

> ...there is considerable confusion about just what the speaker should do. Although most coaches would probably agree that he should entertain in some manner, they might well disagree on how the entertaining should be accomplished. ...The coach and student are left without a clear mandate in preparing an after-dinner speech other than to be humorous. Unfortunately, however, original humor does not come readily

> to most people....In selecting a subject for a contest in after-dinner speaking, moreover, the student faces a particularly artifical situation....There will be no meal served before the speech and no occasion which can be simulated (Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes, 1976, pp. 221 - 222).

A literal interpretation of the name of the contest event of after-dinner speaking, like the one identified above, does pose problems for both the contestant and the critic-evaluator. If the event of after-dinner speaking is regarded as an example of a type of rhetoric, however, less confusion may exist. In subsequent remarks, Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes suggest that the student be evaluated on the bases of being able to find a subject which is humorous and that one topic area other than forensic experiences might be foibles of human beings (1976, p. 222). Additionally, they suggest that the means of eliciting humor through the use of comic techniques and timing might be another area for potential evaluation of the after-dinner speaker (1976, p. 222). The general impression one receives from the treatment of the after-dinner speech by Faules, Reike, and Rhodes, is that they perceive a lot of uncertainty surrounding both the nature of the event and the actual judging of the event. As a postscript, however, their assessment of the situation may have since changed because of greater exposure to after-dinner speakers by contestants and judges.

While the number of theorists writing about after-dinner

speaking is rather limited, one other source of insight into the criteria being suggested for the evaluation of the after-dinner speaker may be the handbooks or rule books of the various state speech organizations. In the North Dakota High School Activities Association's Handbook (1986), for instance, the judge is asked to rank and rate contestants using the following criteria: "the originality of ideas, clarity and effectiveness of organization, use of language, communication of purpose, delivery and general effectiveness" (p. 47).

Most of the forensic theorists suggest criteria for the evaluation of after-dinner speaking which are rather similar in nature to those expressed by the participants at the 2NCF. While the public address standards of the 2NCF appear applicable to the judging of after-dinner speaking, the literature review does reveal that there are additional items which might be added to the set of standards generated by the 2NCF. Specifically, there is some sense that the critic-evaluator should also assess the originality and creativity exhibited by the speaker; the ability to share humor and to tell stories; the ability to manage the entertainment aspect of the speech; and the means by which the humor is elicited.

One other avenue of assessing the applicability of the standards of evaluation suggested by the 2NCF is to note how those criteria interface with the opinions of judges currently involved in criticizing contest speakers. The data base for input of that

nature is extremely limited. One study, however, does shed some light upon what judges are using as criteria of evaluation as they assess contest speakers in after-dinner speaking (Anderson and Martin, 1983).

According to the findings of Anderson and Martin (1983), judges saw after-dinner speaking as a legitimate contest event and indicated that they enjoyed judging the event. Judges also claimed that they felt the overall amount of humor in a speech did not necessarily make the speech a better speech, and some felt that the after-dinner speech had some ties to persuasion. Further, respondents also indicated that the humor should not offend and should be in good taste. Judges indicated that a lively delivery was helpful and that they preferred that note cards not be used. With respect to the composition of the speech, judges perceived that the speech should contain a serious point; that the focus of the speech should be narrow and possess a relationship to the listeners; that the topic should have some social significance; that the topic be developed thematically; that the humor used as supporting material be dispersed throughout the speech; that alliteration and exaggeration were acceptable forms of humor; that the speech have some measure of originality; and that speech should provide the humor - delivery should not be the source of humor but serve to complement the humor in the speech (1983, pp. 14-16).

In response to the overall question of the appropriateness of

the 2NCF's standards of evaluation for the category of after-dinner speaking, one can say thay they appear to be appropriate. One final issue to be addressed in this article is what if anything can or should the critic-evaluator add to the standards already available from the 2NCF'theorists?

In addition to the standards of the 2NCF, critics might incorporate the suggestions provided by theorists and active judges. Principally, critic-evaluators should probably consider adding comments on the originality exhibited in the speech; the ability of the contestant to relate humor; the ability of the speaker to manage the entertainment component of the speech; and the ability to use humor in an appropriate and tasteful manner.

There is some merit to the cliche' that if it isn't broken don't fix it. In some ways, one might do more damage and the good by encouraging judges to add extra items to the evaluation process. As Simon suggests in Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action (1976):

> The distinguishing features of a genre must not only be namable but operationalizeable: i.e., there must be clear by which two or more independent observers can concur in identifying predesignated characteristics of rhetorical practice when confronted with samples of rhetorical practice ....Independent observers must not only have clear rules or criteria for distinguishing characteristics of a genre, but

> must also be able consistently to assign items of rhetorical practice (e.g., whole speeches) to generic categories according to those rules....If items of rhetorical practice are to be consistently identified as fitting within one genre or another, it follows that these items should be internally homogenous across salient characteristics and clearly distinguishable from items comprising an alternative genre (pp. 36-37).

The implications of Simon's remarks for the critic-evaluator of after-dinner speaking are that any items of evaluation added as standards should be clear and identifiable to all judges. Until particular attributes of the after-dinner speech recur on a regular basis, one should not use those attributes as a primary means of deciding a round. Rather, they ought to be, and certainly should be, considered acceptable areas of feedback for the contestant. For example, assessing the means used to interject humor into the speech is not an area where high agreement exists among critics. Some critics might enjoy and also encourage students to use puns, while other judges may dislike puns as a means of adding humor to a speech. Superimposing the acceptance or rejection of the use of the pun as a means of adding humor would seem inappropriate on the part of a judge, because there is not a conclusive response on the matter among theorist or practioners.

The overall position offered in this article is that the

standards generated by the 2NCF are applicable to the evaluation of after-dinner speeches. Additionally, this writer maintains that there are probably other items which are genre specific to after-dinner speaking which could be added to the standards already available from the 2NCF. New criteria for the evaluation of the after-dinner speech should not be added without some field testing and the concurrence of the critic-educators. To add a particular criteria to the evaluation process without testing presupposes its validity as an educational concern. If one is to offer a direction for future research, this writer would recommend field testing of some additional criteria for evaluating after-dinner speakers. This call for additional research is not meant to imply any deficiency in the standards set forth at the 2NCF. Rather, the call for added research is a call for exploring ways of channeling more constructive feedback to the student.

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